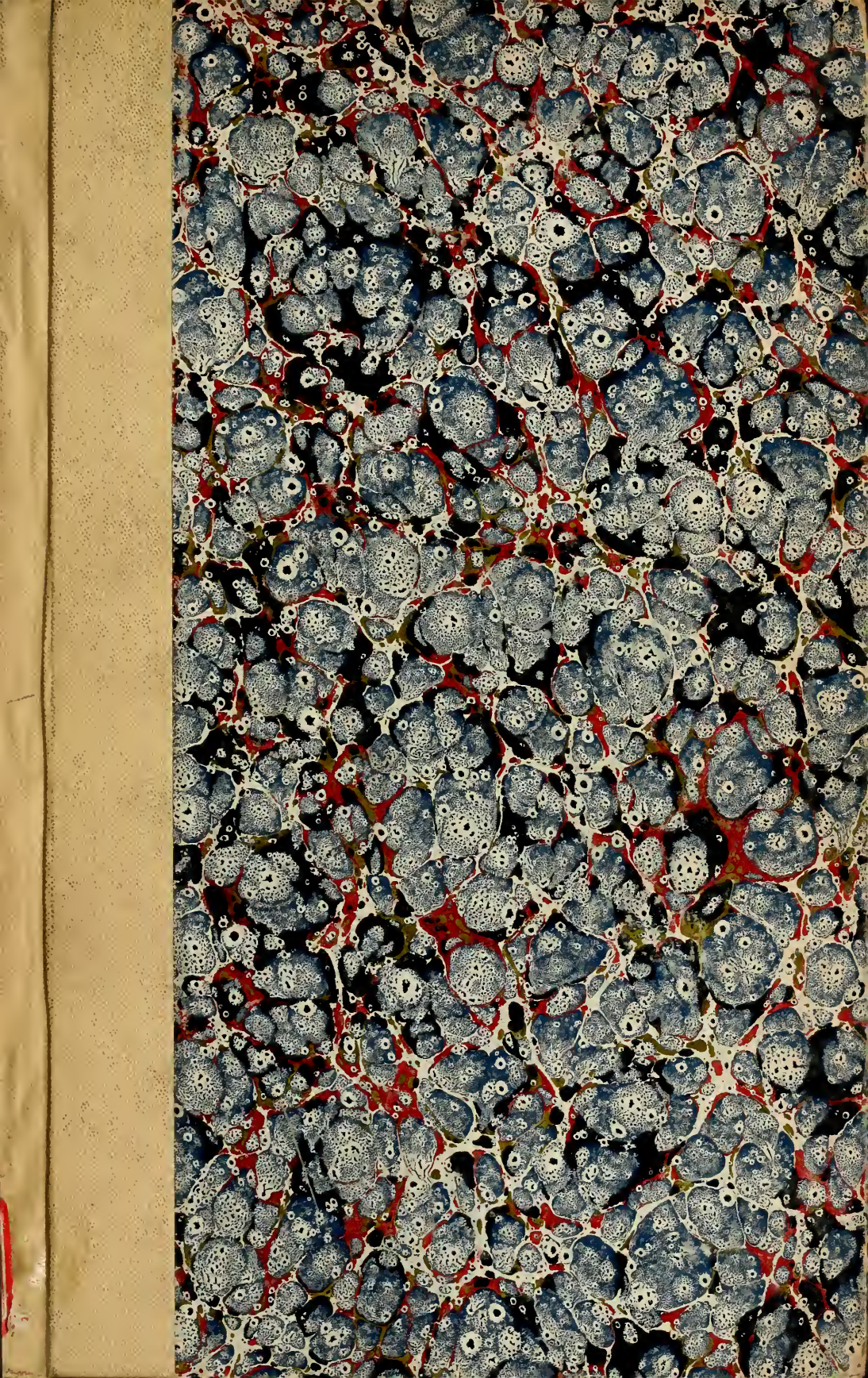

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OF

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WILLIAM THADDEUS HARRIS

BY

EDWARD DOUBLEDAY HARRIS

MEMOIR

OF

WILLIAM THADDEUS HARRIS

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REPRINTED FROM VOLUME II. OF THE MEMORIAL BIOGRAPHIES OF THE NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

Charles M. Folsom, Esq.
Cambridge.
June, 1882, Mass.

CAMBRIDGE
JOHN WILSON AND SON
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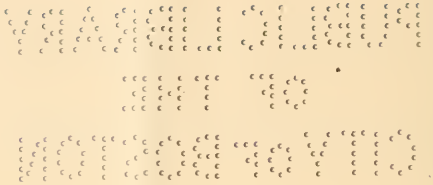

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May 10, 1905

WILLIAM THADDEUS HARRIS

In the ancient parish church of Ottery-Saint-Mary, in Devonshire, England, was solemnized in the month of November, 1605, the marriage of John Harris with Alice Sprague. Of their ancestry nothing is known. The same entry of the church register that records the marriage tells us that he had come thither from Alisberie. They were the ancestors of William Thaddeus Harris, the subject of this memoir.

To John and Alice Harris were born at least ten children. Thomas, the eldest, was christened, an infant, in August, 1606, and married in April, 1630, Marie Farant, possibly a descendant of French Huguenot parents, and died in his native place in January, 1645, leaving an only child, Thomas, to continue his line.

This second Thomas, christened in the parish church July, 1637, found his way, a widower, to Boston, New England, some time between 1670 and 1675, accompanied by his only surviving child, a daughter Jane, named for her mother. Here he took to himself a second wife, the widow Rebecca Crowkham, joined the Old South Church, purchased a goodly estate on what is now Bowdoin Square, and set himself diligently at work to build up a fortune and a second family. His success was more pronounced in the first matter than in the last, for at his death in January, 1697-1698, an only son remained to him to continue the name in the city of his adoption, and

inherit the home reared for him by his father's industry. The widow married two years later, and the fair estate was doomed to early dissipation and loss.

Benjamin Harris, the only surviving son of Thomas and Rebecca, was born in Boston in 1694. He married at an early age, Sarah, the widow of John Matthews, and died in his native town November. 1722, leaving, in his turn, an only son, Cary, born 1720-1721.

Cary Harris married in 1743 Mehitable Crowell (a descendant of the daughter Jane whom the emigrant Thomas Harris had brought with him from England), and died in Boston, January, 1749-1750, leaving an only son William to continue the line.

William Harris was born July, 1744. It is possible that through the consanguinity existing between his parents he inherited a double share of the emigrant's proclivities. He certainly possessed enough of his wandering spirit to induce him to cross the narrow Charles, and found for himself a home in Charlestown, within sight, however, of the walls that his ancestor had reared. He was a scholarly man, and quiet, fond of his books and home. Here he married Rebecca, the daughter of Thaddeus Mason, a graduate of Harvard College, and a man of much culture and eminence, from whom, undoubtedly, the love for antiquarian studies so pronounced in succeeding generations of the family, was transmitted to their descendants. Eight years after this marriage came the war of the American Revolution. At the burning of Charlestown by the British fleet, June 17, 1775, his beautiful house was destroyed with its contents, while his wife and little children were hurried off to a distant place of safety, and he, with his neighbors and friends, espoused the popular cause. Three years later he went to the little town of Lancaster, where his wife had taken refuge, to die. Once again the male line was confided to an only son, the first-born of Captain William and Rebecca Harris,

born July 7, 1768, and named for his distinguished grandfather Thaddeus Mason. In 1787 the boy of nineteen graduated at Harvard College, and began his life's work. Through the influence of friends he received the appointment of private secretary to President Washington, but on his journey to Philadelphia to assume his duties was stricken down by what proved to be a long and severe illness, compelling the relinquishment of the office. He returned to Boston, resumed the study of theology, and in due time was ordained to the pastorate of the First Church at Dorchester, where he remained nearly half a century, and until within a few years of his death. He was early honored by Harvard College with the degree of Doctor of Divinity, and became widely known through his published sermons, his works on natural history, and freemasonry, and for his historical and antiquarian researches. He died in Boston, the ancient home of his family, April 3, 1842, leaving, the first instance in six generations, more than a single son to perpetuate the race. His widow, Mary, the daughter of Dr. Elijah Dix, a lady noted for her stately beauty, survived him, and died ten years later.*

Thaddeus William Harris, the eldest son of Thaddeus Mason Harris, was born in Dorchester, November 12, 1795, graduated at Harvard College in 1815, received the degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1820, married in 1824 Catherine, the daughter of the eminent practitioner, Amos Holbrook, M. D., and commenced the practice of his profession in Milton. Seven years later he was summoned to Harvard to become the successor of the venerable Benjamin Peirce as the librarian of the institution, a position which he filled until his death in January, 1856. He possessed in a strong degree the inherited tastes for natural history and antiquarian studies which had distinguished his father, and became the acknowledged

* See memoir in Mass. Hist. Society Coll., 4th series, II. 130.

American authority in entomology, besides earning for himself the reputation of a scrupulously exact and skilful antiquary.*

William Thaddeus Harris, the subject of this notice, the oldest son of Thaddeus William Harris, M. D., was born in Milton, January 25, 1826.

Heavily burdened from his birth with severe physical infirmities, his entire life was a struggle, increasing with his years, and finally overpowering him at an age when most men come into full possession of their intellectual powers. Of himself he writes, "The days of childhood are often compared to a dream: to me they were a troubled dream. Debarred from its pleasures, I had a double portion of its sorrows. . . . I was obliged to have recourse to books, which, in process of time, became my meat and drink, my only solace, my only amusement." At the age of five years he accompanied his father's family in their removal to the seat of the university, and in 1840 entered the Hopkins Classical School in preparation for Harvard College, to which he was admitted in 1842. During his college life he was a close and conscientious student, achieving a standing highly respectable, and in Latin and philosophy a distinguished position. He was the recipient of a full share of college honors, and was awarded a Latin oration at his graduation in 1846. He evinced at an early age a strong interest in his family history, collecting during his boyhood from aged friends and relatives many facts concerning the earlier generations of his maternal ancestry, as well as much matter relating to other Milton and Dorchester families.

During his Junior year at Harvard he published his "Epitaphs from the Old Burying Ground in Cambridge." The spot had been his haunt from childhood. Here were buried Shepard, and Dunster, and Mitchel, the Brattles

* See memoir in Entomological Correspondence, Boston Nat. Hist. Society, Occasional Papers.

and the Vassalls, Belcher and Remington, and a score of others, famous in the history of the colony and college. In addition to the epitaphs of the ground, the work contains a complete list of the deaths as recorded in the town records between 1638 and 1700, and notices of several of the distinguished men and families once resident in the town. The work excited much attention among the antiquaries of the time, and Mr. Harris was the recipient of many notices in commendation of the assiduous care and historical research exercised in its preparation. The biographical notes attest the happy faculty which their author possessed in being able to present the topics on which he wrote in a form attractive even to the general reader. The preparation of this work for the press brought him into pleasant personal relations with several of the antiquaries of the day, and the acquaintances thus formed were retained in most cases until his death.

About this time, August 30, 1845, he became a resident member of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, then in its infancy, and also a corresponding member of the Dorchester Antiquarian Society.

His last year in college was one of much intellectual activity. His diary bears constant evidence of his early and prolonged hours of study and research, and, in fact, until the last years of his life, when compelled by ill health to desist, he frequently worked at his desk with scarcely a cessation from five o'clock in the morning until late into the evening. His reading at this time was largely on New England history and kindred subjects; it was carefully and systematically conducted, important authorities read and read again, until the result was a mass of carefully digested and critically examined matter which few men have the patience to acquire, and fewer yet the faculty of using to advantage. At this time he prepared for publication an alphabetical list of the female

names found in Farmer's Register with the possible purpose, as he jocosely remarks in his diary, of at some time writing a history of the "matrons of New England." He also prepared for the author the index to Young's "Chronicles of the Pilgrims."

Upon his graduation Mr. Harris became a member of the Dane Law School, commencing a special line of study with the object of devoting himself to the conveyance of real estate and the examination of titles. A letter written to his life-long friend, Mr. Charles W. Folsom (H. C. 1845), under date of September, 1848, gives a glimpse of his occupations at that time. He writes that he rose "at four in the morning, studied law six hours a day, pursuing at the same time special studies in Latin, Greek, Spanish, and Anglo-Saxon, reading a course of political economy and history, and preparing three several works for publication, one of which was in the press." This last was a new edition of Hubbard's "History of New England," placed in his hands by the Massachusetts Historical Society, and published in 1848. It was carefully collated with the old manuscript of Hubbard, in the possession of the Society, and a large body of learned notes added by him in the appendix. At this time, while enjoying an unusual freedom from pain, and indulging, as he writes, "in lofty aspirations and ambitious projects," he contracted a severe cough, which was followed by hemorrhage from the lungs, temporarily prostrating him, and compelling an entire cessation from labor. The urgency of the publishers, coupled with his own eagerness to complete the work then in press, forced him to a speedy resumption of his editorial duties. In the letter before quoted from, he says: "For four days I wrote incessantly, stopping hardly to take breath, expecting every moment that I should give out. On the fourth day at midnight, when all was still around me, I wrote the last sentence in the book. Thank God! who sustained me throughout."

At the College Commencement of that year, 1848, he received the degrees of A. M. and LL. B, and soon after entered the law-office of Mr. William I. Bowditch, of Boston, at that time one of the leading conveyancers of the city. Here he remained until the spring of 1850, devoting, however, much of his time to his favorite pursuits of history and genealogy. In the early part of 1849, through the medium of Mr. Samuel G. Drake, with whom he continued on terms of peculiar intimacy to the end of his life, he assumed the editorship of the "Historical and Genealogical Register," then in the third year of its existence, and the organ of the New England Historic Genealogical Society. In the following year he wrote for the editor, the late Mr. Isaac Smith Homans, an account of Cambridge and the University, included in a work published in 1851, under the title of "Sketches of Boston, Past and Present." The condition of his health, already seriously impaired, forbade a steady continuance of any kind of literary labor, and finally induced him to renounce the profession he had chosen, and for which he seemed in many respects admirably qualified. At the College Commencements of 1849 he was honored with degrees from Yale, Amherst, and Williams, and in the same year was elected a Corresponding Member of the Rhode Island Historical Society. Later he was made a Corresponding Member of the Archæological Society of Athens, Greece, and of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Preston and Manchester, England. In the early part of 1850 he was chosen assistant librarian at the Boston Athenæum; but the comparatively easy duties of this position became at length too arduous for his slowly failing strength, and after a service there of only eight months he was again compelled to abandon his tasks. From that time on, with the exception of occasional intervals when temporary strength gave him courage to make renewed efforts, he ceased to perform any continuous or regular work.

In the summer of 1852, tempted thither by the beautiful golden days, he copied the more ancient epitaphs in the old burial-ground at Watertown. It was a peculiarly interesting spot to him, for it was the resting-place of many of his own ancestors, who had been among the earliest settlers of the town. Here day by day he toiled among the old stones, gathering fresh encouragement from his friend Mr. Bird, whose ready spade continually unearthed half-hidden treasures for the patient student. The manuscript copy of these epitaphs, prepared in the plain round hand which was itself a part of his inheritance from long-gone generations, was placed in the hands of the writer of this memoir for publication. A most careful comparison with the originals discovered scarcely an "i" to be dotted or a "t" to be crossed. It was printed in a limited edition in 1869, and forms one of the quaintest additions to the epitaphic literature of New England.

In 1853 Mr. Harris was admitted to practise as an attorney and counseller in all the courts of the Commonwealth.

In 1854, at the solicitation of Edward Everett, he undertook for the literary executors of Daniel Webster the examination and arrangement of the private papers of the eminent statesman, then recently deceased, but did not live to complete the task. Towards the end of July, after struggling against disease and infirmity until exhausted, he was compelled to fold his hands and await the end. Even then a painless release was not vouchsafed him. Day after day his sufferings were extended, until the morning of the 19th of October, when Providence mercifully eased him of his burdens, and he sank to rest in the twenty-ninth year of his age. He was laid in a tomb in the Old Cambridge burying-ground, surrounded by the monuments among which he had wandered in his boyhood, and whose inscriptions have been preserved to posterity through his industry. A few years later his body

was removed to the family lot in the Cambridge cemetery.

In the year 1848 Mr. Harris received the degrees in freemasonry at Amicable Lodge in his adopted city, and he continued a warmly-attached member of the order as long as he lived. In the last years of his life, his connection with the fraternity was a source of great pleasure and solace to him. He was highly esteemed by the members, who evinced their regard by elevating him to the office of Master of the Lodge, — a position which he held at the time of his death. During his last illness, he was the recipient of constant and unwearied attentions at the hands of his associates, and was buried with masonic ceremonies.

A notice of Mr. Harris was prepared for the Historical and Genealogical Register by his college classmate, Professor Francis J. Child, and was published in the January number of 1855. The editor, Mr. Samuel G. Drake, in an accompanying note, adds: "Mr. Harris projected several historical performances, which, had he lived to finish, would have been of great value. Of one in particular, he many times spoke to the editor, and once showed him a quantity of manuscript of it. That was a 'Continuation of Prince's Chronology.' To what extent he went with it is not known; but what was shown was so well done that Mr. Prince, it is believed, could not have wished it better done had he been here with all his former ability to appreciate such a work." He devoted much time at intervals to the preparation of an edition of Mourt's "True Relation"; but this, with other work commenced, and in some cases well in progress, he died without completing.

Mr. Harris was an enthusiast in the collection of old and rare books, and the library which he left is rich in historical works of considerable value. A book in his hands received the tenderest care, and no one could better appreciate a fine edition or more highly esteem a biblio-

graphic prize than he. One who knew him long and well writes: —

"He was by nature very reserved and reticent, and this reserve and reticence was by his great bodily infirmities increased in a most marked degree, so that but few persons knew him intimately or well. He lived as one by himself, and in himself alone. We lived close by one another; and in that natural way which neighborhood itself opens, I knew him, and gradually passed beyond the bounds of mere acquaintance, and was admitted to his friendship, — was permitted to know the man himself. He was one over whom the shadow of death seemed to hang from the beginning. He lived always, and during the last years consciously, under this shadow; but it was gradually lifted higher and higher until it was lost in the clear sunlight of his faith and trust. He did not fear to speak of or look forward to the end of his mortal life. He did not dread to walk through the dark valley; but, as one weary and heavy-laden with his earthly pilgrimage, he hoped for Christ's promised rest. As one strengthened and sustained by divine might, he was ready, and ever longed to depart and be with Christ in the world beyond the grave."

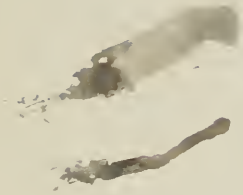
Another, to whom he was bound by special ties of friendship and early associations, writes: —

"One letter of his to me I have especially wanted to find: it was a piteous wail, — a cry out of the depths, as if his spirit must rend the walls of its prison-house, and fly where there was peace and rest. It spoke of his sorrows, of his hopelessness, of how solitary he felt among men; but it also spoke of his love for his friends, and the deep yearning he had to be loved himself. This was the only time in which he ever unbosomed himself to me, — indeed, I doubt whether he ever spoke so to anybody. I think it did him good to speak out. I wrote him such words of comfort and love as I could. The subject was never revived or alluded to again by either of us, but it gave an additional tenderness and sweetness to our intimacy; and I have always thought that some of the serenity and happiness of his later years, when he was full of interests and surrounded by so many admiring friends, came indirectly from this sudden out-

pouring of his heart; that he was led to look at things in a little different light, and to see that he too had his work to do, and must bravely fight his way, as he so bravely did, to universal confidence and respect."

Sensitive and retiring to a painful degree, he rarely broke through his habitual reserve, except in the presence of the few intimate friends who had learned to understand and sympathize with him; then his conversation was wont to be replete with anecdote and humor. In his friendships he was peculiarly earnest and constant; and the writer well remembers with what affectionate delight he was wont to welcome back a classmate or friend who had been for some time absent. In all his habits of life he was scrupulously systematic, and in all his work thoroughly honest and conscientious. His diary reflects somewhat the temper of the man, — at times confident, hopeful, and gay, and then despondent and full of gloom. At times he indulges in flights of fancy; again is overwhelmed with self-reproaches at his own shortcomings, and full of repinings over his own unhappy lot. His life, short as it was, is eloquent in its teachings. If to him much had been denied, to him also much was given. He laid down his life at its close with no talents wasted, — crushed and defeated in the battle which all are fighting, but with a strong, earnest faith living to the end, and triumphant over all.

Requiescat in pace!



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